



UNIVERSITÀ DI PISA

PhD course in Molecular Biotechnologies
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PhD Thesis

**"Hyaluronan role in *Xenopus*
laevis visceral skeleton
morphogenesis"**

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INDEX

Preface	pg I
Abstract	pg II
INTRODUCTION	pg. 1
1. The “hyaluronic acid” alias “hyaluronan”	pg. 1
1.1. Chemical properties	pg. 1
1.2. Hyaluronan biosynthesis	pg. 2
1.3. Hyaluronan catabolism	pg. 4
1.4. Hyaluronan is one of the main extracellular matrix components	pg. 4
1.5. Intracellular hyaluronan	pg. 6
1.6. Hyaluronan functions	pg. 6
2. Hyaluronan shyntheses	pg. 9
3. The hyaladherins	pg. 10
3.1. The hyaluronan-receptor CD44	pg. 11
3.2. The Receptor for Hyaluronan-Mediated Motility (RHAMM)	pg. 13
3.3. Hyaluronan-receptors loss of function studies	pg. 14
4. The hyaluronan binding proteoglycan versican	pg. 15
5. The amphibian <i>Xenopus laevis</i> as model system	pg. 17
6. The neural crest cells	pg. 19
6.1. Neural crest migration	pg. 19
6.1.1. Initiation of migration	pg. 19
6.1.2. Dispersion	pg. 20
6.1.3. Cessation of migration	pg. 24
7. The extracellular matrix and neural crest cells migration ..	pg. 24
8. Cranial neural crest cells differentiation	pg. 28
8.1. Hyaluronan in neural crest cells differentiation	pg. 30
AIM OF THE WORK	pg. 32
EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES	pg. 33

1. Embryos handling	pg. 33
2. Embryos microinjection and manipulation	pg. 33
2.1. Morpholino antisense oligos	pg. 34
2.2. CAPPED mRNAs	pg. 34
2.2.1. <i>Constructs used for overexpression analysis:</i>	
<i>linearization and capped mRNA transcription</i>	<i>pg. 35</i>
3. <i>In situ</i> hybridization	pg. 35
3.1. Purification of plasmidic DNA	pg. 35
3.1.1. <i>Constructs used for gene expression analysis:</i>	
<i>linearization and RNA transcription to generate</i>	
<i>antisense RNA probes</i>	<i>pg. 35</i>
3.2. Synthesis of digoxigenin (DIG) labeled probes	pg. 36
3.3. Whole mount <i>in situ</i> hybridization	pg. 36
3.4. <i>In situ</i> hybridization on frozen tissue sections	pg. 36
4. bHABC staining	pg. 37
5. Tunel assay	pg. 37
6. Alcian Blue staining	pg. 37
7. RNA extraction and RT-PCR	pg. 38
8. Solutions	pg. 39
 RESULTS	 pg. 41
 1. Gene expression profile of <i>XHas1</i> and <i>XHas2</i> during	
cranial neural crest cells development	pg. 41
2. Hyaluronan detection in post-migratory cranial neural	
crest cells	pg. 45
3. Gene expression profile of <i>XCD44</i> during cranial neural	
crest cells development	pg. 46
4. Comparative analysis of the gene expression profile of	
<i>XHas1</i>, <i>XHas2</i> and <i>XCD44</i> during cranial neural crest cell	
development	pg. 47
5. <i>XHas1</i> and <i>XHas2</i> gene loss of function by a morpholino	
antisense oligos based approach	pg. 48
5.1. <i>XHas1</i> and <i>XHas2</i> down-regulation interferes with cranial neural	
crest cells migration	pg. 49

5.2. <i>XHas1</i> and <i>XHas2</i> down-regulation cause apoptotic death of post-migrated cranial neural crest cells	pg. 51
5.3. <i>XHas1</i> and <i>XHas2</i> down-regulation leads to altered visceral skeleton formation	pg. 53
5.4. <i>XHas1</i> and <i>XHas2</i> loss of function control experiments	pg. 55
5.5. Analysis of <i>XHas1</i> and <i>XHas2</i> double knock-down embryos.....	pg. 57
6. Analysis of the <i>XHas2</i> gain of function	pg. 58
7. Analysis of the <i>XCD44</i> loss of function	pg. 59
8. Expression profile of <i>XRHAMM</i> during cranial neural crest cells development	pg. 62
9. Expression profile of <i>Xversican</i> during cranial neural crest cells development	pg. 63
DISCUSSION	pg. 67
1. <i>XHas1</i> and <i>XHas2</i> synthesize hyaluronan during <i>Xenopus laevis</i> cranial neural crest cells development	pg. 67
2. Hyaluronan is required for proper migration of cranial neural crest cells	pg. 68
3. Hyaluronan contributes to the survival of cranial neural crest cells in post-migratory stages	pg. 70
4. Hyaluronan is required for proper visceral skeleton development	pg. 71
5. The <i>XHas2</i> gain of function does not alter cranial neural crest cells migration	pg. 73
6. <i>CD44</i> is required for proper migration of cranial neural crest cells	pg. 73
7. <i>XRHAMM</i> is expressed by migrating <i>Xenopus laevis</i> cranial neural crest cells	pg. 75
8. <i>Xversican</i> is expressed during <i>Xenopus laevis</i> cranial neural crest cells development	pg. 76
CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES	pg. 78
REFERENCES	pg. 81

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	pg. 96
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PUBLISHED PAPERS:

1. Ori M, Nardini M, Casini P, Perris R, Nardi I. (2006). XHas2 activity is required during somitogenesis and precursor cell migration in *Xenopus* development. *Development*. **133**, 631-40.

2. Casini P, Ori M, Avenoso A, D'Ascola A, Traina P, Mattina W, Perris R, Campo GM, Calabroni A, Nardi I, Campo S. (2008, submitted to *Int. J. Dev. Biol.*). Identification and gene expression of versican during early development of *Xenopus*.

PREFACE

During the first year of my PhD programme I took part in a project dealing with the identification of *XCD44* gene expression pattern and its functional role during *Xenopus laevis* muscle development. These results are reported in the last part of this thesis as publications in "*Development*" journal (Ori, Nardini, Casini *et al.*, 2006).

This PhD thesis describes all the work I have done in the last two years. In this period my efforts were focused on the project "Hyaluronan role in *Xenopus laevis* visceral skeleton morphogenesis" that is the subject of this manuscript. Moreover, as complementary studies, I report in the thesis the expression pattern of the *Xversican* and *XRHAMM* genes during *Xenopus laevis* development. The *Xversican* cDNA has been cloned in collaboration with the group of Prof. Calatroni, University of Messina and the data regarding the identification and the gene expression of this gene are reported in the manuscript attached at the end of this thesis (Casini *et al.*, 2008) actually submitted to an international peer review journal ("*International Journal Developmental Biology*").

ABSTRACT

Hyaluronan is a crucial glycosaminoglycan of vertebrate extracellular matrix. In dynamic cellular systems, such as embryonic development, tissue regeneration and tumorigenesis, hyaluronan has been shown to influence cell behaviour, including cell migration, proliferation and differentiation both by assembling the interstitial matrices and by directly influencing cell behaviour via interaction with signal transducing receptors such as CD44.

We are using *Xenopus laevis* to study the role of hyaluronan and CD44 *in vivo* during cell migration and differentiation processes. The spatio-temporal gene expression profile of the three known vertebrate hyaluronan synthases (*Has1*, *Has2* and *Has3*) shows a very close conservation of *Xenopus laevis* *Has* genes with that of mammals. Recently, we demonstrated a critical role of *XHas2* and *XCD44* during muscle formation and precursor muscle cell migration. To further dissect the role of these molecules on migration and differentiation processes, during my PhD programme I then focused my attention on cranial neural crest cells (NCCs) development, knocking-down the *XHas1*, *XHas2* and *XCD44* gene functions. I showed that the hyaluronan synthases and the hyaluronan receptor present a dynamic expression pattern during cranial NCCs development suggesting multiple roles in the various steps of cranial NCCs migration and differentiation. I demonstrated that *XHas1* and *XHas2*, in concert with *XCD44*, are involved in the NCCs migration and that hyaluronan, but not *XCD44*, is required in post-migratory stages to support cells survival. In order to investigate possible action mechanisms underlying hyaluronan function, I started to explore the possible functional interactions of hyaluronan with alternative receptors, such as RHAMM, and hyaluronan binding proteins such as the proteoglycan versican.

On the whole the presented data demonstrated an unsuspected critical role of hyaluronan in the visceral skeleton morphogenesis and in particular in NCCs migration and differentiation. Moreover I showed for the first time the gene expression pattern of *Xversican* and *XRHAMM* in *Xenopus laevis* opening new working hypothesis that will be further investigated in the near future.